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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN - AMBASSADOR VISITS THE RASHT VALLEY, WHERE FOOD IS THE MAIN SECURITY CHALLENGE

REF: A) 2008 DUSHANBE 00189; B) 2008 DUSHANBE 00216; C) 2008 DUSHANBE 00236

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a November 3-4 visit to the Rasht valley, an opposition stronghold during the civil war, Ambassador Gross met with local government officials, NGO and international organization representatives, and residents of a village which benefits from USG Food for Peace funding. Despite last summer's security incidents in Tavildara, the Rasht valley remains secure and stable. USAID Food for Peace programming has been a resounding success in response to the brutal 2007 winter and subsequent economic crisis, although food security needs remain urgent. The entire village of Tagoba met with the Ambassador to express appreciation and request continued involvement by the USG. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) On November 3, Ambassador, USAID Country Director, Poloff, and PAO travelled via the broken, gravel road linking Dushanbe to the Rasht Valley. The 135 mile drive to Garm takes four hours, a major challenge to Rasht farmers seeking markets for their produce. With most young men working in Russia, Rasht Valley women eke out a living by farming the small patches of arable land along the mountain walls. Rasht District Administrator Mahmudsharif Tolibov described the security situation in the valley as stable and said that summer 2009 fighting in neighboring Tavildara did not affect his district. "The top priority in our valley is peace and stability. None of our people went to join the fighting in Tavildara. Since our population has survived the civil war, they will not get involved."

¶3. (U) Tolibov reported that 8,000 Rasht men are working abroad, mostly in Russia. Although living/working conditions for migrants in Russia have improved over the last year, he said the economic downturn has led to lower remittances and several families reported that they had not received money for several months. Despite the downturn, Rasht men have not returned to the valley in large numbers. Those that have returned for the winter plan to travel to Russia again in the spring since Russia offers more opportunities than does farming in Tajikistan. When asked if there have been cases of trafficking in persons, Tolibov responded, "I am Administrator for nine years and have not heard of such a case." Tolibov praised the work of Mercy Corps and its local representative. "We see the American people in the person of this lady." Tolibov called for more foreign involvement in his District to support economic development and foster tourism.

¶ 4. (U) Tolibov praised President Rahmon's leadership and noted the attendance of 5,000 Rasht residents when the President recently opened a new bridge. On the February 2010 parliamentary elections, Tolibov told the Ambassador that Rahmon ordered District Administrators to refrain from interfering. He insisted that elections would be free and fair, boasting that six political parties were active in Rasht. When the Ambassador asked about the relative strength of the parties, Tolibov replied, "The People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (the ruling party, PDPT) is first and foremost, and has the support of government officials, young people, business, and the cultural and education spheres. Next, the Islamic Renaissance Party has a certain number of supporters. After that the Democratic Party. The other parties are poorly represented and not supported." He said the Ministry of Interior would provide election security. "Of course they will not interfere in the process of voting. They are only there to prevent quarreling by youngsters."

¶ 5. (U) OSCE and UNDP representatives based in Garm concurred that the security situation in Rasht is stable, adding that the local population did not support foreign fighters in Tavildara in summer 2009. Several former members of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) reportedly reside openly in the Garm area, including Mirzokhoja Ahmadov, a former police leader. In February 2008 one of his supporters shot and killed the national OMON commander who had come to Garm to arrest Ahmadov (See Reftels). OSCE representative Tibor Lakati said that the former UTO leaders have not led opposition to local government institutions. On elections, Lakati said that local political party organizations are not active and lack financing, premises, equipment, and organization.

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¶ 6. (U) The biggest challenge for the Rasht Valley, according to Lakati, is poor roads and infrastructure. The long drive to Dushanbe limits the ability of farmers to bring goods to market. Electricity only runs a few hours per evening in Garm and less in Rasht villages. UNDP officials expressed similar frustration, noting that they provided computers to schools that lack any power to run them. Besides agriculture, there are no opportunities for legitimate employment in Rasht and no manufacturing base in the district.

¶ 7. (U) The Ambassador visited the English Access Microscholarship Program and USG-funded Legal Assistance Center in Garm. At the English Access Program, sixty schoolchildren from vulnerable families met with the Ambassador and demonstrated their English skills. Demand for the program increased dramatically after one Rasht boy, now a local celebrity, studied in the United States through the FLEX Program. The Legal Assistance Center has assisted 101 residents with land disputes and divorce/alimony cases, mostly involving women who are trying to establish their legal rights after their husbands abandoned them for work in Russia. The same NGO running the Legal Assistance Center soon will launch an elections awareness campaign to advise election officials and Rasht residents on their rights and responsibilities during the February parliamentary polls. Some Rasht residents have requested the Center's assistance in finding employment; it referred 20 such applicants to the government's Migration Office for work in Russia.

¶ 8. (U) On the road through the Tagoba Jamoat, children led donkeys carrying sacks of flour marked "USA". At Duoba village, an excited crowd of Food for Peace beneficiaries met the

Ambassador and USAID Director to discuss successes of the program in addressing the aftermath of the harsh 2007 winter and subsequent food emergency. The November 4 visit marked the last day of food distribution in Duoba at the conclusion of the Single Year Assistance Program (SYAP). Ending in November 2009, the SYAP served 193 households in Duoba in addition to 5,000 direct beneficiaries in eight Jamoats, primarily mothers and their children aged 24 months and younger.

¶ 9. (U) Mercy Corps staff closely cooperated with local leaders and District Authorities to offer nutrition, pre-natal, and agricultural training. In meeting with men at the village mosque, male residents expressed full support for the program. "Before the women fed babies cow milk. Now we know that they need to feed them breast milk." A religious leader said that the support from the United States demonstrates that "All people are the same and each has to help the other." Duoba women cited a dramatic decline in cases of diarrhea in their children following the SYAP's nutrition training. "As we are living in a remote village, we are facing big problems in getting to medical care. Now we can help our children here, thanks to the American people and especially to Mercy Corps."

¶ 10. (U) Another element of Mercy Corp's program implementation, model greenhouses, produced crop yields two months earlier than normal harvests, residents enthusiastically built their own greenhouses with the support of local volunteers. In Duoba alone, 47 families built greenhouses. A Mercy Corps staffer described this as the "most sustainable element of the SYAP," since families see a real benefit in increased production.

¶ 11. (SBU) Comment: Food security in the Rasht Valley remains a major challenge due to the exposure of often inaccessible villages to volatile environmental conditions. The local Jamoat leader admitted that increased yields from greenhouses would not provide an adequate alternative livelihood to Rasht Valley's men, who will continue to travel to Russia for work. The absence of unemployed men may be one reason that opposition leaders did not find supporters during this summer's fighting in nearby Tavildara. It is clear that the SYAP has generated good will toward the USG and made an immediate impact in the lives of Rasht residents. Mercy Corps staff believe that "one year is not enough" for long-term sustainability. Post concurs, and seeks Department support for further Food for Peace funding in Rasht. End Comment.

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